

# Flamingos on the runway!

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**Des Flamants sur la piste.** Le 2 octobre 2009, un groupe de 50 Flamants nains *Phoeniconaias minor* a été photographié sur la piste du nouvel aéroport international de Sikhuphe au Swaziland. Les oiseaux ont probablement été contraints de se poser pendant une violente tempête de pluie et ont pris la piste pour une zone humide. Le groupe comprenait dix juvéniles, ce qui indique que les oiseaux venaient de leur site de reproduction. Leur point de départ ainsi que leur destination sont toutefois difficiles à déterminer, mais ils utilisaient probablement une voie de migration est-ouest à travers le Swaziland, venant peut-être du Mozambique du sud. Des observations anecdotiques telles que celle-ci pourraient aider à mieux comprendre les mouvements de l'espèce.

On 2 October 2009, at 08.00 hrs, a flock of 50 Lesser Flamingos *Phoeniconaias minor* was photographed on the runway at the new site for the Sikhuphe International Airport in Swaziland. The area (26°25.5'S 31°41.0'E) is c.45 km north-east of Manzini in mostly *Acacia* savanna. The flock comprised 40 adults and ten juveniles (Figs. 1–2).

To our knowledge, this is the first recorded incident of flamingos on a tarred airport runway. Guilherme *et al.* (2005) reported a flock of Puna Flamingos *Phoenicoparrus jamesi* at Rio Branco International Airport, Acre, Brazil, but it is unclear if the birds landed on the tarred surface or merely adjacent to the runway. In May 2007, near Lake Bogoria in central Kenya, ten dead Lesser Flamingos were found on a major roadway (B. Childress *in litt.* 2007). But what caused the flamingos to use this artificial surface at Sikhuphe International Airport? According to T. van Vuuren, who photographed the birds, a large thunderstorm passed through the area the night before and c.35 mm of rain fell during this period, and it was still drizzling when the photographs were taken. We suspect that the birds were forced to make an 'emergency landing' to avoid the strong winds and heavy rain. They may have even been blown off course and in opting to land discovered the wet runway, which seemed to mirror a wetland (Fig. 3). This was also surmised to be the case for the Brazilian and Kenyan flamingos. The Rio Branco incident followed strong winds associated with a cold front that passed through the region in late April 2005, and led the authors to believe that the flock had been blown off course (Guilherme *et al.* 2005). The Kenyan incident was associated with a huge rainstorm that passed through the region the previous night, suggesting

that the birds were forced to land during the storm; their deaths probably resulted from being hit by passing vehicles (M. Virani *in litt.* 2007). The Swaziland birds remained on the runway for c.1 hour before flying off and landing in grassland at Panata Ranch, 10 km away, and a few hundred metres from the Umbulizi River. Here they remained for a few hours before flying back to the airport, at c.12.15 hrs. At 14.00 hrs T. van Vuuren left the site with the birds still on the runway. The following day no flamingos were reported anywhere in the immediate vicinity and it can be assumed that they left the site the previous evening. Two days later, on 4 October, a single juvenile was reported by W. & C. Mundel, owners of Panata Ranch. The bird was in poor



**Figure 1.** Flock of 50 Lesser Flamingos *Phoeniconaias minor* on the newly built runway at Sikhuphe International Airport, Swaziland, 2 October 2009 (Tienie van Vuuren)

Un groupe de 50 Flamants nains *Phoeniconaias minor* sur la piste nouvellement construite de l'Aéroport international de Sikhuphe, Swaziland, 2 octobre 2009 (Tienie van Vuuren)



**Figure 2.** Part of the flock with juveniles amongst the adults, Sikhuphe International Airport, Swaziland, 2 October 2009 (Tienie van Vuuren)

Une partie du groupe, avec des juvéniles parmi les adultes, Aéroport international de Sikhuphe, Swaziland, 2 octobre 2009 (Tienie van Vuuren)

**Figure 3.** Lesser Flamingos *Phoeniconaias minor* ready for take-off, Sikhuphe International Airport, Swaziland, 2 October 2009 (Tienie van Vuuren). Note how wet the runway is.

Flamants nains *Phoeniconaias minor* prêts pour le décollage, Aéroport international de Sikhuphe, Swaziland, 2 octobre 2009 (Tienie van Vuuren). Noter comme la piste est mouillée.

condition and seemed exhausted, and was taken to a farm dam inside a game camp. The bird spent two days at the dam recovering before it flew off.

Where did these birds come from, and where were they going? That the flock numbered several juveniles indicates that the flamingos had probably left their breeding grounds a few months previously. Consequently, they could have come from one of the two traditional breeding sites in southern Africa—Etosha Pan, in Namibia, or Sua Pan in Botswana. Both are north-west of Sikhuphe, Etosha Pan *c.*1,800 km distant and Sua Pan 860 km. It is also possible that they came from Kamfers Dam, a newly established breeding site for Lesser Flamingos in southern Africa (Anderson 2008). The dam is located on the outskirts of Kimberley, in South Africa's Northern Province *c.*750 km south-east of Sikhuphe. Based on this they were perhaps heading east to southern Mozambique, where the species is known to occur almost year-round (Parker 1999). However, in light of the fewer recent records from this region (B. Childress *in litt.* 2007), it seems that Lesser Flamingos may no longer be using suitable sites in southern Mozambique, but further monitoring is needed to substantiate this. It is hypothesised

(Simmons & Borello 1999) that birds may use the east coast of Africa to commute between East Africa and southern Africa. Based on this, the origin of the flamingos could also have been Lake Natron, the species' only other regular breeding site in the entire region. This would infer that the birds moved south, following the Mozambique coastline and were moving west to inland localities in South Africa. However, the limited ringing of flamingos and the recent satellite-tracking of Lesser Flamingos in Botswana and Kenya (McCullogh *et al.* 2003, Childress *et al.* 2007) has provided evidence for only regional movements by the species, with no movement by any ringed / satellite-tagged birds between East Africa and southern Africa. As few records exist for both Lesser and Greater Flamingos *Phoenicopterus (ruber) roseus* in Swaziland (see Harrison *et al.* 1997), it is probable that Lesser Flamingos use sites in this region only as brief stop-over points.

This observation provides some anecdotal evidence of movement of Lesser Flamingos in the sub-region; such *ad hoc* reports often provide valuable information on species' movements and distributions. Observers, whether birders or landowners, should therefore be encouraged to



report such incidental records to their local bird club or national wildlife agency. Sightings can also be submitted to web-based systems: in southern Africa, records can be captured under the auspices of the second southern African Bird Atlas Project (<http://sabap2.adu.org.za>), Kenyan records can be logged using Kenya Birdfinder (<http://www.worldbirds.org/kenya>) while the Tanzanian Bird Atlas (<http://tanzaniabirdatlas.com>) captures sightings in Tanzania.

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